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Faster and Faster the Word of the Lord

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Faster and Faster the Word of the Lord

Banging open
our bedroom door while Rosie and I engaged
in unholy acts, he shouted "Fornicators!
You will die a billion deaths on a bed of nails
in Satan's big house!" He was seven years old.
Who knows where he got it. Rosie and I
gave our hearts to Jesus.
We'd named him Isaiah, cropped it to Ike.
We gave him back his full name
and drove him to the Mall.
Some kind of poetry had taken his tongue
and we meant to share it. In the bed
of my Ford F-150 he prowled, slapping
his oversized Bible, stomping and jumping,
leaning like a dog on a chain. "Beware
the evils of the flesh. The flesh is weak.
It craves, and when it craves,
Satan vaults into your chest.
He takes the controls. He gobbles your heart
which is an energy pill. He stands up
in your chest and looks out your eyes.

Friends, put away your credit cards
and paychecks. Renounce your gold and silver,
your halter tops. Let Jesus swing
in the hammock of your heart.”
He fell weeping to his knees.
Rosie tossed a poncho
over his back. He took an eight count
like that—like a boy could make himself die
if he wanted, or make himself live forever.
The small crowd of nondescript bag toters
hushed, waiting to see which it’d be.
When Isaiah rose up quivering, stern of face
and white as a cloud, I could see some folks
had been reluctantly moved. He was
seven years old. His teachers had said
he was unable to read. But there he stood,
smart as Jesus himself.
The beauty of it stung my eyes.
I could feel myself beaming
like he’d just sunk a free throw
with no time on the clock.
You lie down with your wife
and this is what it comes to.
I climbed onto that truck, said
things I never knew I could say.
I told the world *I am a hollow man*

and sweet Jesus filled me up.
Rosie tried to call me down,
but my heart was abundant—
I could not move. Look, I
am nobody and my wife is nobody: Earl
and Rose Marie Jarvis. 820 Buttercup Lane.
Parents to Isaiah, named for a man we met
on a run to New Hampshire. The man
rode a Harley, weighed three hundred pounds,
ate mushrooms out of a bag like potato chips,
spouted a crazy philosophy. This was the sixties.
We thought he was a prophet
till he knocked off a Handi Stop,
got nailed by the local police.
You tell me:
Was it wrong to drive my son to school
in the back of the Ford? The principal
called him disruptive, crazy. How can you be crazy
and seven years old? He was tossed out of school.
Two weeks later we were hauled into court.
My tires were slashed; my toolshed burned.
*Dear God, I prayed. If those be your words
in my boy's mouth, give us a sign.*
He gave us a sign.
Isaiah came home from preaching one night
naked, spray-painted red, head to toe,

the single word SATAN scrawled in black
on his chest. Rosie was shaken,
but Isaiah was firm, a soldier of God.
We drove him to the Mall that very night.
He preached of a wrathful God.
A fat woman waved her flabby arm, yelling,
"God wants nothing to do with you, you
dirty little boy." That night,
I thought to bathe him in turpentine.
He refused. "These are my tribulations,"
he said. "All to the greater
glory of God." We let it be. He preached
next morning to the stubborn school children.
We let it be. The boys who'd done the thing
went *woo woo woo*, clapping their hands
to their mouths, dancing circles
'round the truck. We let it be.
After two weeks, Isaiah's skin
began to fester; he preached about Job.
Another week and his eyes swelled shut.
We set a chaise lounge in the truck
and he preached about blindness,
the enormity of light in God's Holy City.
"When you have seen God," he said,
"there's no more to see." A month
later he was too weak to preach.

We propped a microphone on his chest,
put speakers on the roof—to no avail.
He croaked and sputtered.
We sat in the cab and cried.
For two months he lay in bed,
holding his Bible on his chest.
Rosie dragged her rocker into his room;
I sat in the kitchen and prayed.
One night I took Rosie in my arms—
she was all heartbeat and bone—
and I testified as to how
we would meet again triumphant
on that further shore. She looked at me
like she'd slipped dicing carrots
and sliced open her thumb.
“Earl Jarvis,” she said, one word
at a time. “You don’t know
that’s true. What if it ain’t.”
“What if it ain’t,” she sobbed
and went to the boy, to her rocker
and her homemade prayers.
I left then and walked the block
until my anger turned to sadness
and my sadness into what?
I circled the Peter Paul candy factory
through whose chain-link fence

we have walked our lives
these twenty years. Finally
something settled inside me
like a steel ball dropping
into a felt-lined pocket.

I was standing outside our house,
looking through the window
as into a fishtank—my lighter,
my keys, my Bible on the table
like relics from an ancient civilization.

They meant less to me than a vase
with a bird on it made three thousand
years ago. One month from that night
Isaiah stopped eating. My Rosie convinced me
to haul him to St. Luke's. This
was a mistake. A tempting of God's will,
so God let him die. Three days
before his eighth birthday.

Dead by God's hand.

Two years have passed; the authorities
and journalists will not let us be. To find
some peace, Rosie and I have bought a Harley.
A hog with saddlebags and fairing.
Rosie has painted it with scenes
from *Revelations*: the dead
rising incorruptible, drifting out

from the windows of office buildings
and tenements alike. She's painted them
like flames, like goldfish in a curved bowl.
A plane has crashed into a building
and, while the body parachutes down,
something else lifts up
towards the face of Jesus
which hovers in the clouds.
We like to ride fast in the hills
above this valley, leaning the turns
till our knees almost scrape. Lately,
we'll ride to Holy Land U.S.A.,
where a man has built an entire city
to honor the memory of God. But even that
has crumbled beyond belief. The state
has erected a fence to keep the malingerers out,
but we climb through a hole the vandals
and visionaries have clipped in that fence.
We walk out on those streets
crunching glass with our boots
past buildings no taller than Rosie.
We sit on the houses and drink beer
from the paper cups we bring. We gaze
at the stars or down at the smog-blurred valley,
at the lights—the houses and factories,
the car lights streaming. Now that everything

is finished, who are we. The miniature
holy men who walk these streets
have chicken wire where their hearts
used to be. They put me in mind
of something Isaiah once said: "The truth
is not pleasant. It sticks out in the world
like a bone through flesh." Someday soon,
Rosie and I will stand trial.
The lawyers assure us we will be jailed
forever. We don't care. We draw some comfort
from the vision our Puerto Rican brothers saw
right here in Holy Land—a silver Cadillac,
filled with the faithful, skidded off the ridge
and floated in the air, car and all
called back to the Lord—though it is clear now
that we will not be so fortunate. But if only
Isaiah had been called. If only Isaiah
had not become that bag of loosened bones
I lifted and carried to St. Luke's.
But it is too late to question God's plan.
We stand at the foot of the huge, lighted cross
that announces Holy Land to the world.
A full-grown man with his arms spread
would look like a boy up there, a boy
would look like a doll. Once,
we sat up here all night, hugging and rocking,

a hundred thousand people alive
in the valley below us—not one of them
meant anything to me. I felt the television
and radio waves passing through me like a wind.
I was unreachable as God until I saw
Rosie's hand on my knee, clenched, the skin dry,
all the veins and tendons lit up,
and the moment collapsed, my heart
rent by circumstance. Rosie clings to me,
but it is Isaiah she reaches for. Maybe
we should have saved him. Maybe
he'd have grown into a hateful child,
flicking the television channels, shaking
the house with rock 'n roll music,
torturing squirrels with a .22, but
he'd be alive. And we wouldn't be up here
with God's silence, with His miserable
servants, in His shrunken city
where piety and sin kneel together
in the alleys, where God,
when he shows himself, lifts
the whole damn Cadillac,
but won't raise an eight-year-old boy.